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## Locally-Owned Retail Stores and Downtown Revitalization: Investigating the Role of Place Attachment

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## Locally-Owned Retail Stores and Downtown Revitalization: Investigating the Role of Place Attachment

Keywords: *downtown, place attachment, retail, revitalization*

**Background:** Locally-owned stores are differentiated from chain retailers by more than just their product offerings. Often, it is the size, location, and level of personalized service offered by locally-owned retail stores that distinguish them from corporate chain stores (Robertson, 1999). Frequently located in downtown neighborhoods, locally-owned retail stores also provide advantages that come with proprietors who are embedded in the community and who seek to support it (Tolbert, Irwin, Lyson, & Nucci, 2002). In turn, the sense of community offered by the presence of locally-owned businesses draws people to downtowns and away from suburban shopping centers (Robertson, 1999). Moreover, according to Sneed, Runyan, Swinney and Lin (2011) “the very identity of a city is intimately tied to [its] downtown” (p. 125). Thus, through revitalization, many downtown areas across the US are seeking to become shopping destinations by creating consumption spaces that are distinct from those in the suburbs (Padilla & Eastlick, 2009). However, such efforts require business owners who are willing to risk opening stores within geographic areas that are undergoing substantial change.

Because the success of the downtown revitalization process depends in large part on the success of the retail establishments within it, it is possible that the role of place and the bonds that people form with places are key factors involved in achieving this success. *Place attachment* is a concept that helps to explain connections that people have with places, including commercial settings (Maclaran & Brown, 2005). Although the fact that consumers develop attachments to retail stores has been well established in the consumer behavior literature (Debenedetti, Oppewal, & Arsel, 2014), the concept of place attachment has yet to be explored relative to owning and operating a retail store. Likewise, place attachment has not been investigated in the context of downtown revitalization. Yet the concept is important to both, and particularly when the two are examined together. Thus, the purpose of this study was to understand the role of attachment to place within the dynamic that exists between local retail store ownership and downtown revitalization.

**Method:** An ethnographic approach to research was employed. The field location consisted of the downtown of one mid-sized city in the southeastern US. This city was considered an appropriate location because of the prevalence of locally-owned retail businesses in the area, which has been undergoing revitalization for the past several years. Upon receipt of university IRB approval, specific data collection methods included in-depth and field interviews with 22 store owners and employees, along with observation at a total of nine field sites. For each of the nine field sites, the physical surroundings, the people within them, and the activities occurring within them were observed over a period of eight weeks. Questions asked during the interviews focused on the decisions involved in owning and operating the store within the downtown setting. Interviews and field notes were transcribed verbatim. Patterns in the data were noted and categorized (Spiggle, 1994) and then conceptual links between patterns were identified and

interpreted through the lens of place attachment. Three primary themes emerged from this process: *It Just Feels Right*, *A Neighborhood Vibe*, and *Safe Space in a Unique Place*.

**Findings:** The first theme highlights the bonds that store owners have with the spaces in which they have set up shop. For example, when Brad was asked why he chose his specific location, he replied, “What made it happen was taking one step inside this building, which was a disaster at the time, pipes hanging, dead rats in the corner, it was rundown, so of course I said *YES*.” Other store owners described similar emotional connections to their chosen store sites. Margaret shared, “This place has the metal doors, it had the driveways that came in...we could visualize the space it could become... it’s you know... like when you’re looking for houses, you just get that feeling about it being right.”

Alongside a bond with the specific space selected for the store, some participants attributed their decisions about store location to the feelings evoked by the downtown area, as highlighted in the second theme. For example, Greg shared how he was drawn to downtown because of the way that the local atmosphere reflected on his business, saying, “We really liked that this was a funky area, you know? The vibe...and people in those industries tend to be independent, independent thinkers, independent businesses, you know...that type.” Analisa also talked about the entrepreneurial spirit she experienced in the downtown and how it drew her to the place she selected for her shop: “I want to be part of what is happening downtown.”

When business owners were asked why customers shop at their stores and are drawn to the downtown area, responses focused on the uniqueness that the place offers to diverse groups of people, comprising the third theme. For example, Katherine explained that her downtown store creates attachment by “developing relationships...intimate connections, it’s unique...it’s that safe place.” Likewise, Sabine encourages attachment by ensuring her product offerings align with the uniqueness of the area, saying, “Our core customer really loves the downtown setting...[it’s] energetic and that’s our vibe,” and she strives to reflect this through what she sells. Participants utilize the character of downtown and what it offers to augment the character of their stores and what their stores have to offer. The result is a unique sense of place that bonds people not just to a single store, but to the downtown as a whole.

**Conclusion:** Findings of this study highlight the importance of place attachment not just among participants as owners of small retail stores, but for the entire downtown as a community of retailers operating within an area that is being revitalized. Notably, the perspectives shared by the participants in this study point to the extent to which people, including store owners, are just as important as places in fostering place attachment. With many downtown areas across the US undergoing revitalization, this study points to the need to understand the synergies between retail store owners and the downtown. As two parts within the whole of the revitalization process, both are important to creating an overall sense of place and prompting attachment to it. Although limited in its focus on one geographic area, this study suggests further opportunities for research that examines the importance of place attachment for locally-owned retail establishments in general and specifically relative to the different types of places in which they operate.

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